Truth Commissions: Memory, Power, and Legitimacy. By Bakiner Onur . Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. 328p. $65.00

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By Mihaela Mihai. Forthcoming in *Perspectives on Politics.*

This well-researched book deals with a timely question: how can we understand the impact truth commissions have in post-conflict societies? Sparked by the exemplary experience of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission—an institutional experiment that continues to polarize political and academic debates—there has been intense political and academic interest in these post-conflict mechanisms. Set up to excavate truths from under thick layers of denial, commissions are essentially political sites where processes of contestation over alternative versions of the past unfold. Bakiner enters these debates and sets himself an ambitious goal: overcoming, on the one hand, naïve idealizations about these institutions' capacity to secure healing for victims and general, social reconciliation and, on the other hand, cynicism about their being simply pawns in the hands of reactionary elites. He proposes to offer a well-calibrated assessment of truth commissions' success in securing their goals, arguing that they are "neither fully subversive, nor fully docile." (p. 4)

Through a mix of theoretical reflection and the analysis of fifteen case studies, Bakiner argues that, in spite of often being the result of transitional compromises, truth commissions have surprised their various audiences. In some cases, they delegitimized the very political forces that sponsored their creation, successfully navigating the field of power that trapped them between the state and various civil society forces. However, far from uncritically celebrating the upsets made possible by these commissions' constrained discretion, Bakiner acknowledges that, overall, their impact has been modest. Given that truth commissions have always operated under difficult political, economic and cultural circumstances, they have had a mixed record, both in terms of having their reports *directly* translated into policy and *indirectly*, by enabling and responding to sustained pressures by civil society groups.

Although not introduced as such, two related factors appear to overwhelmingly influence impact, according to Bakiner. The first is the commission creation process. The set up of the commission involves decisions about the mandate, including the composition of the commission, its remit (which crimes and violations are to be investigated), the time period covered, as well as the definition of its juridical powers (subpoena, amnesty, etc.). All these determine the position that these institutions will adopt in striking a balance between existing memory tropes and potential new ones, between limited, forensic understandings of truth and complex accounts of the structural roots of violence, and between elite pressures and demands by victims' associations.

The second—related—factor that conditions impact is the level of institutional and societal support for the institution of the commission. Truth commissions that enjoy stability and public endorsement can venture to adjudicate between contending social memories. They can also offer a platform for opposing voices to be heard publicly, and can even change the terms of the debate by incorporating new concepts and explanations—the "right to truth" being the most obvious example. Other times, recognizing their institutional fragility and the divisiveness of the issues at stake, commissions explicitly avoid taking sides, omitting from their reports thorny issues that are likely trigger spirals of violence.

In order to substantiate these claims, Bakiner discusses no fewer than fifteen truth commissions. First, the Peruvian and the Chilean commission are juxtaposed and analyzed in great detail. Their setups were very different and, while the Chilean had a very restricted mandate—reflected in its findings and the framing of its narrative—the Peruvian one published conclusions that dramatically changed the collective understanding of the historical sources and scope of violence. Second,

thirteen more cases are introduced more superficially, organized into two camps. The first camp covers commissions based on "exclusionary creation processes," while the second comprises commissions resulting from "participatory processes." (p. 149). The conclusion is that commissions whose setup and functioning were tightly controlled by the government tend to have more direct impact as their findings make their way into policy. Alternatively, commissions whose setup was more inclusive—i.e. other voices than the government's were heard in the decision-making process—tend to indirectly impact the community via the social mobilization accompanying them.

The merits of the book are many. The injunction against both naïveté and cynicism is most welcome. The first part focuses on definitions, main features, typologies and chronologies. Comprehensive tables map the world of most truth commissions established since the 1980s. The second part makes concrete these classifications by introducing sophisticated analyses of several case studies. This combination of conceptual framework building, classifications and analysis of cases makes it an excellent introduction to this growing institutional phenomenon and a great pedagogical tool for courses in what is now rather uncontroversially called the field of "transitional justice." Refreshingly, an entire section is dedicated to a discussion of the methodological reasons behind academic disagreement over truth commissions' impact. This section sheds light on many of the shortcomings plaguing the way in which social scientists have tried to measure what are essentially elusive, complex, longitudinal effects. The lucid observation that truth commissions have always presupposed and reproduced the national framework is also important and worth exploring further.

While the book provides excellent cartographic tools, more could be said about the nature of impact and its determinants. The author seems to oscillate between a purely descriptive and a normatively laden understanding. On the one hand, impact is associated with the capacity to inform policy or mobilise groups. At other points, however, Bakiner prescribes what commissions should do so as to prevent violence and promote human rights. (p. 187, 204) As for the factors influencing impact, it seems rather myopic to zoom in on the setup and the level of state control. The cases discussed range from Latin America, to Africa and Asia. We need to account for the type of violence a commission is mandated to tackle, as well as the timing of the transition in relation to the development of transitional justice as a global phenomenon. Bakiner gestures to the type of transition and the availability of funding as two other explanatory variables, yet the setup is privileged throughout. However, it is unclear that the focus on setup is redeemed, convincingly and across the board, by the thick descriptions.

Structurally, two aspects are worth noting. First, the decision to discuss Peru and Chile in detail—while only briefly analyzing the other thirteen cases—could be better defended. The conclusions drawn about the two countries are supported by the extended analyses, while this is not fully the case with the other thirteen commissions. Second, the last chapter's engagement with Arendt's, Nora's, and Habermas's theories comes rather late in the book. Interesting in itself, this chapter remains somewhat disconnected from the rest of the book. The task of articulating the connection between these thinkers, as well as between this chapter and the first two parts of the book is left to the reader.

The book stands out for its acuity and rigor. In contrast to both overenthusiastic advocates and uncharitable critics, Bakiner occupies the golden middle ground. Together with the panoramic view of truth commissions' complex landscape, this makes the book a valuable and necessary contribution.